



truque [trick]
ilê sartuzi

museu de arte contemporânea, São Paulo

Introduction

Trick consists of a series of subtle interventions — similar to magic tricks — that reveal infrastructural elements of institutional spaces dedicated to culture and art. These works involve technological security elements that are often invisible, playing with the visitor’s experience and focusing attention on peripheral aspects of the museum environment. The exhibition has two main cores: one of them orbits around “Sleight of Hand” (2023-2024) and the other is a series of “Propositions for museum security systems” (2023) that were first published in text format in Revista Rosa.

Trick

Heloisa Espada

Institutional Curator MAC-USP

In the works of Ilê Sartuzi, it is common for different objects to be animated and move in a more or less random manner. These imperfect and fragile mechanisms often create the sensation that something is about to go wrong. Through various resources, ranging from painting to video, from puppet theater to contemporary technologies of different degrees of complexity, the artist exposes gears to dismantle power discourses.

Trick turns to museum institutions and their security equipment, questioning their legitimacy, their role in the history of colonization, and their standardization processes. At first, the exhibition presents a series of works that interfere with the infrastructure of MAC USP, manipulating lights, alarms, and other security devices that usually have the effect of intimidating the public. The works, sometimes triggered by the presence of the visitor, disarticulate the authority of the institution, making it perform in a dysfunctional and delirious way. These works are joined by the video installation Sleight of Hand (2023-2024) and a set of documents and objects related to it, which convert the idea of theft and magic into an artistic gesture. The work records the action carried out on June 18, 2024, at the British Museum in London, when, during a program that allows visitors to handle collection pieces, the artist used a magic technique to swap an original coin, minted in 1645, for a replica. Then, Sartuzi walked towards the street and, before leaving, deposited the coin in the institution's donation box.

This exhibition brings to light not only the contemporary debate about the repatriation of cultural goods but also, in a way, dismantles the museum's black box, allowing the visitor to notice equipment that is usually invisible and naturalized, but whose subtle presence supports and validates the discourses presented there.

Gestures and Spaces for Brand-New Meanings

Marcela Vieira
Exhibition Curator

There are various ways, conscious or not, of entering a space and generating meanings, associations, and, by extension, new memories. Some may step into a space and allow themselves to be captivated by a word, a fleeting impression—an event belonging to the enigmatic domain of affect. Others may engage with space by scrutinizing its angles, planes, quadrants, and light. The distinction between these modes of perception, which we continuously experience, is subtle and often unspoken. Yet, these dynamics are always susceptible to representation through narrative or speculative means.

Nothing, however, prevents different ways of experiencing movement through space from merging, giving rise to exceptional occurrences: structural perceptions shifting into the realm of sensation or, conversely, sensory impressions assuming a geometric register, shaped by movement and rhythmic cadence. Ilê Sartuzi's exhibition *Trick*, installed at MAC USP, explores these observational and spatial possibilities, simultaneously revealing the structure (and infrastructure) of the exhibition space and activating the body's properties through meticulously choreographed movement.

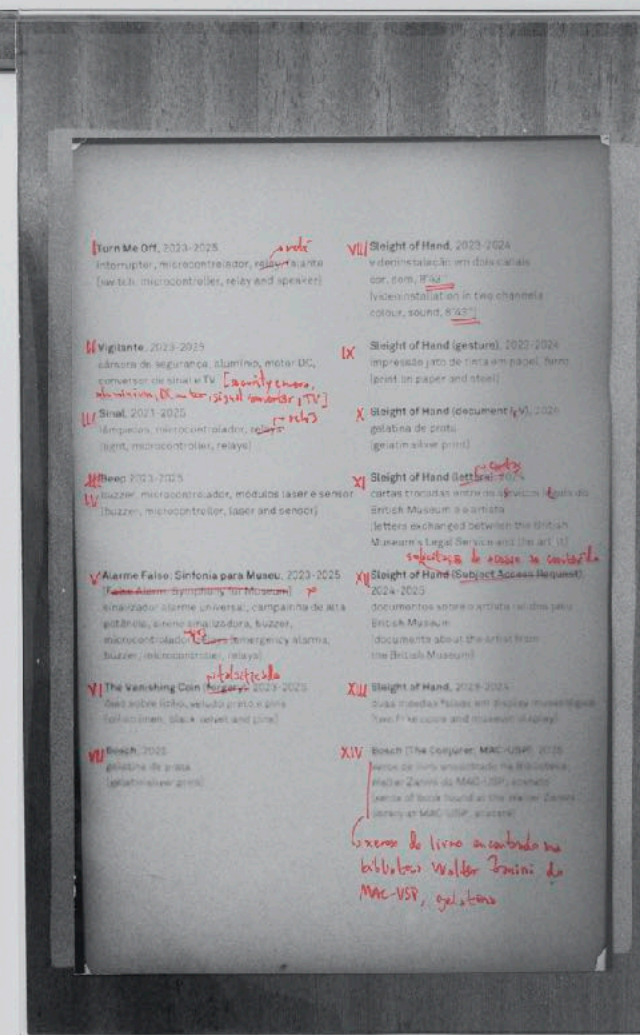
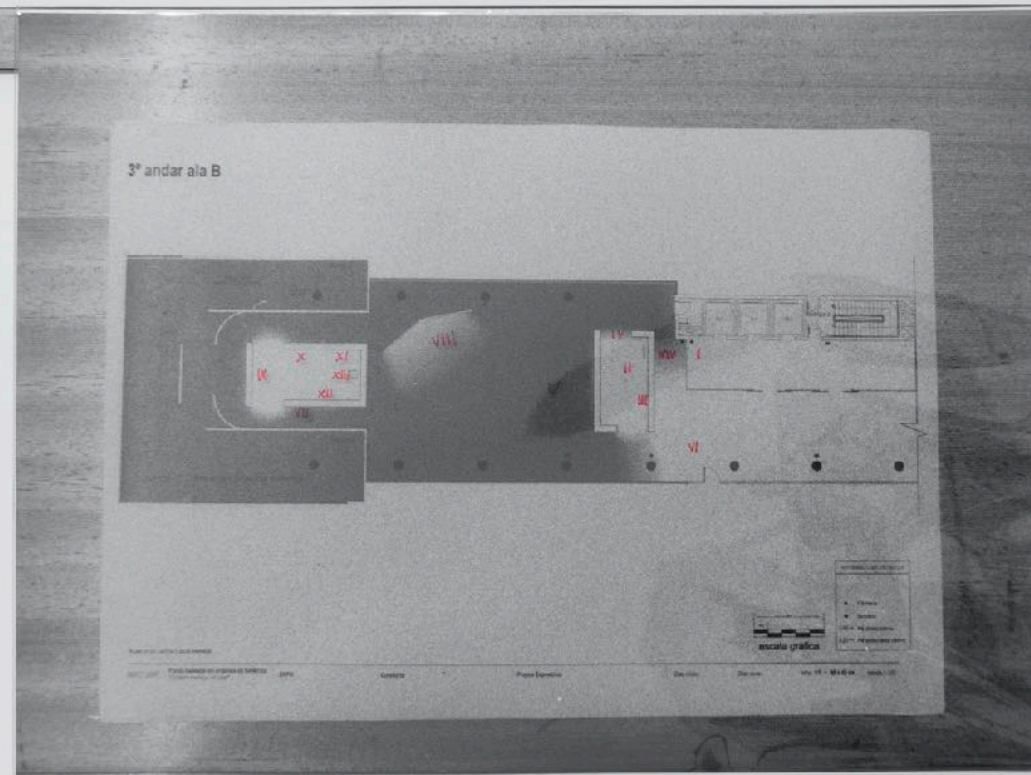
During the production of *Trick*, Sartuzi's approach was particularly remarkable. It involved meticulous research into the museum's structure and agreements with different institutional bodies, including curators, the security team, and the fire department, all of whom engaged in negotiations regarding the architectural scope. On one hand, there was a strong commitment to spatial considerations, evident in the study of the floor plan—an element that is integrated into *Trick* as both documentation or, if we want, an independent artwork. Equally noteworthy is the fact that many of these works—*Turn Me Off*, *Signal*, *False Alarm: Symphony for Museums*, *Vigilant*, and *beep*—emerged from a speculative process, originating as text. This aspect is particularly intriguing, as it reveals that before making visual and aesthetic decisions, Sartuzi engaged in a primarily technical approach, gathering vocabulary, perspectives, and conceptual frameworks related to his subject. Before finally arriving at the image—which potentially embodies novelty or, ideally, the possibility of transformation—Sartuzi's process often draws upon a variety of linguistic models, including literature, architecture, theater, and choreography.

The two-channel video *Sleight of Hand*, recorded at the British Museum in London and now exhibited in *Trick*, confirms Sartuzi's interest in the study of space. However, this time, the exhibition space is strategically approached as the stage for an operation that lies between theft and magic, exploring what these two activities have in common. (Sleight of hand refers to the illusionistic manipulation of an object, making it disappear before the eyes of the other.) To execute this carefully premeditated move, the presence of another person is necessary, because without them, neither the magic nor the theft would be completed and would simply remain as mere practice. For the sleight of hand to be successfully performed, the magician or thief must navigate a complex system of signs, involving rhythmic, spatial, visual, and psychological elements. Because the outcome depends not only on the performer's actions but also on external factors, the thief or magician remains acutely attuned to external agents beyond their own gestures or movements. This is why even the most perfected preparation for the act involves a significant margin of error. When successful, it is not the act itself but the consequences—the gesture, the pass—that is revealed by both theft and magic.

The operations proposed by the tricks require a reconfiguration of gestures and the creation of rhythmic dynamics between the bodies, aiming to inscribe themselves within the supposedly natural order of the situation in which they are about to intervene. Flowing within the rhythm, even if only to participate synchronically, implies an intervention in reality, with the intention of camouflaging oneself within it, simulating spontaneity. From the operation of concrete and real elements, a transformation can happen, opening up new possibilities for perception. In *Sleight of Hand*, the magical action, or theft, performed by the artist leads to a shift in meaning, paving the way for a language that can be utopian and effusive, while also offering a critical perspective on the reality it engages with.

Another recurring element in Sartuzi's poetics emerges in *Sleight of Hand*: the study of bodies. While in previous works these bodies are represented in mechanized or artificially altered forms, often through dismantled mannequins, in *Sleight of Hand*, the characters are real and experience intense apprehension in response to the situation they face. Because they are anonymous—their faces never revealed to us—and silent (the video is accompanied only by a soundtrack that accentuates the rhythm and ambiguity of the outcome), our attention, as viewers, is directed toward the improvised choreography that was intuitively necessary for the success of the project.

And speaking of choreography and spatial configurations, we are invited to experience the exhibition not merely as spectators, but as agents capable of activating its structures, making the environment "speak" and respond to our paths and movements. However, one work in *Trick* challenges us—partly due to its pictorial nature, which contrasts with the exhibition's technological explorations: *The Vanishing Coin*, a replica created by an anonymous art forger whom Sartuzi entrusted with the task of precisely replicating a painting of his own, introduces yet another anonymous body into the exhibition. The concealed identity of the depicted figure shifts the focus to the coin and the gesture that holds it. This painting emerges as an enigma, evoking a *mise en abyme* effect within an exhibition shaped by reproductions, forgeries, replicas—or, if we prefer, tricks—where meticulous layers of self-reference unfold like Russian dolls, encompassing choreographic, conceptual, and, in a broader sense, critical reflections on the institutional context and the circulation of art itself.



map and technical details of the exhibition *Trick*
silver gelatin print, acetate, red pen and acrylic
41.5 x 33.3 cm and 21.5 x 34 cm

and 1460s. In one of his miniatures in a Dutch bible, for example, the Soudenbalch Master represented King Solomon embracing the Shulamite woman, whose dusky beauty is celebrated in the Song of Songs; three other wives, fair-skinned, look on, displaying considerable unhappiness at this usurpation of their lord's affections.

Connections with the book illuminators are not restricted to Bosch's earliest works; they can be discerned in his later productions as well, particularly in the monsters which swarm through his scenes of Hell. This persistent influence of manuscript illumination in his art suggests, in fact, that Bosch may have received his earliest training in the workshop of an illuminator, perhaps at Utrecht, where he could have seen the miniatures of the Soudenbalch Master and his followers.

Other biblical scenes may be ascribed to Bosch's early years: the *Marriage Feast at Cana* (Rotterdam), two fragments of a second *Epiphany* (Philadelphia, Johnson Collection), distinguished by cool, silvery tonalities, and the badly damaged *Crucifixion of St. Julia* (Venice, Palace of the Doges), of which only the central panel is from Bosch's hand. In addition, there are several compositions which have survived only in copies of indifferent quality, including the *Christ among the Doctors* and *Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*, both of which recall the *Conjurer* in style. Among the early drawings are a sheet of animated male figures looking towards the right (New York, Morgan Library), perhaps a study for an *Ecce Homo* scene, and a monumental, relief-like *Entombment* (London, British Museum).



12. HIERONYMUS BOSCH
Group of Male Figures

13. *King Solomon and the Shulamite Woman* from the Bible of Everd van Soudenbalch c. 1455-60



Bosch (The Conjurer, MAC-USP), 2025
photocopy of a book found in the Walter Zanini Library
at MAC-USP, stamp, lightening gel, magnets
29.7 x 21 cm

This painting, entitled "The Conjurer" (after c. 1525) by Hieronymus Bosch, it is actually a copy from a missing original and was important for the development of "Sleight of Hand". For the exhibition, a photocopy of a page from a book found in the Museum's library was made. This work is shown in the presentation of the show, next to the curatorial texts.



The Vanishing Coin (forgery), 2023-2025
oil on linen, black velvet and pins
30.5 x 40.5 cm

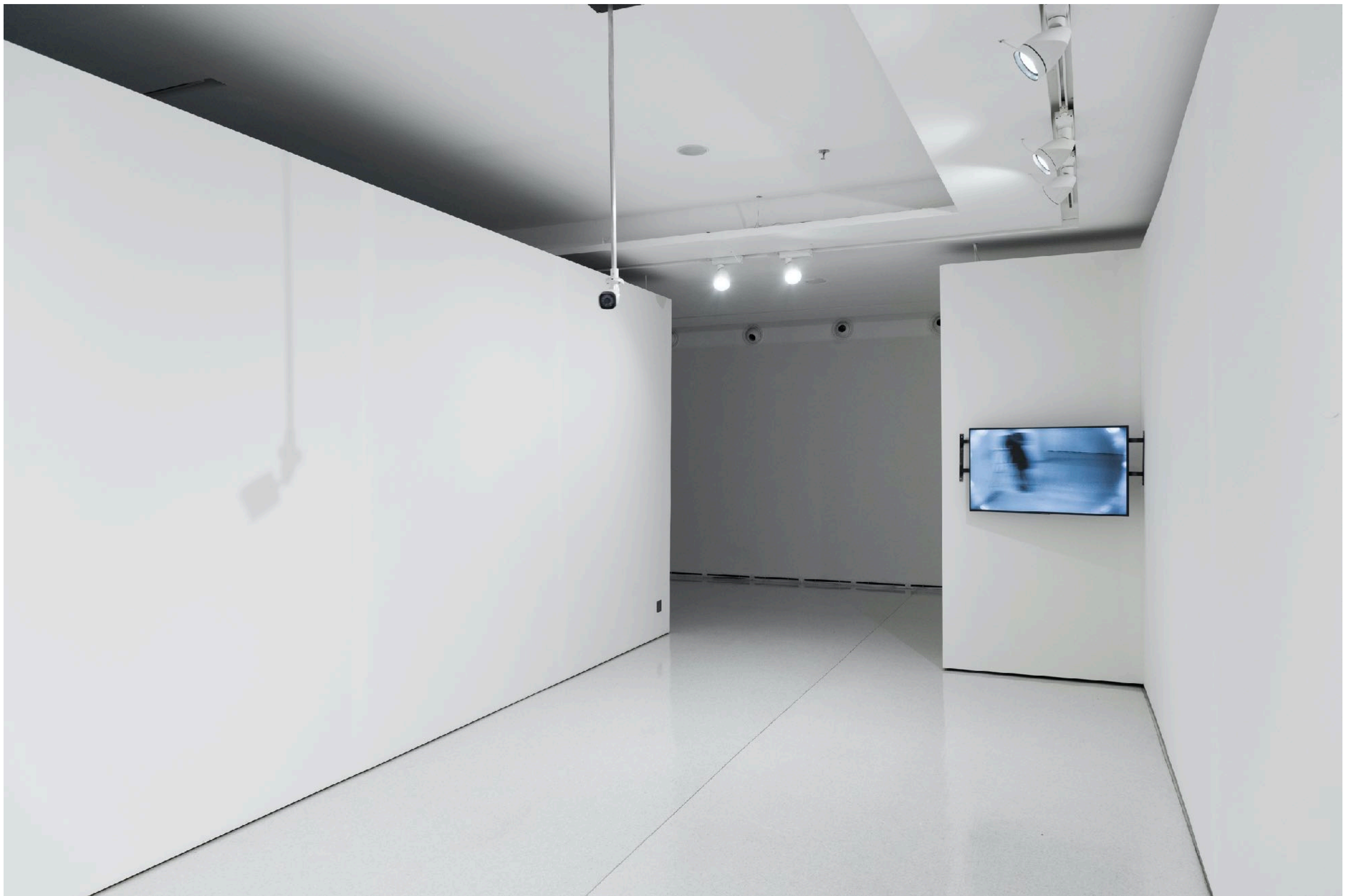
Following recent conceptual interests that culminated in the “Sleight of Hand” project, this work is investigating relations between authenticity and forgery, value and circulation. The painting is a commissioned forgery of one of Sartuzi’s works. After a set of instructions, the professional counterfeiter created a replica of the painting.



Turn Me Off, 2023-2025

switch, microcontroller, relay, speaker
variable dimensions

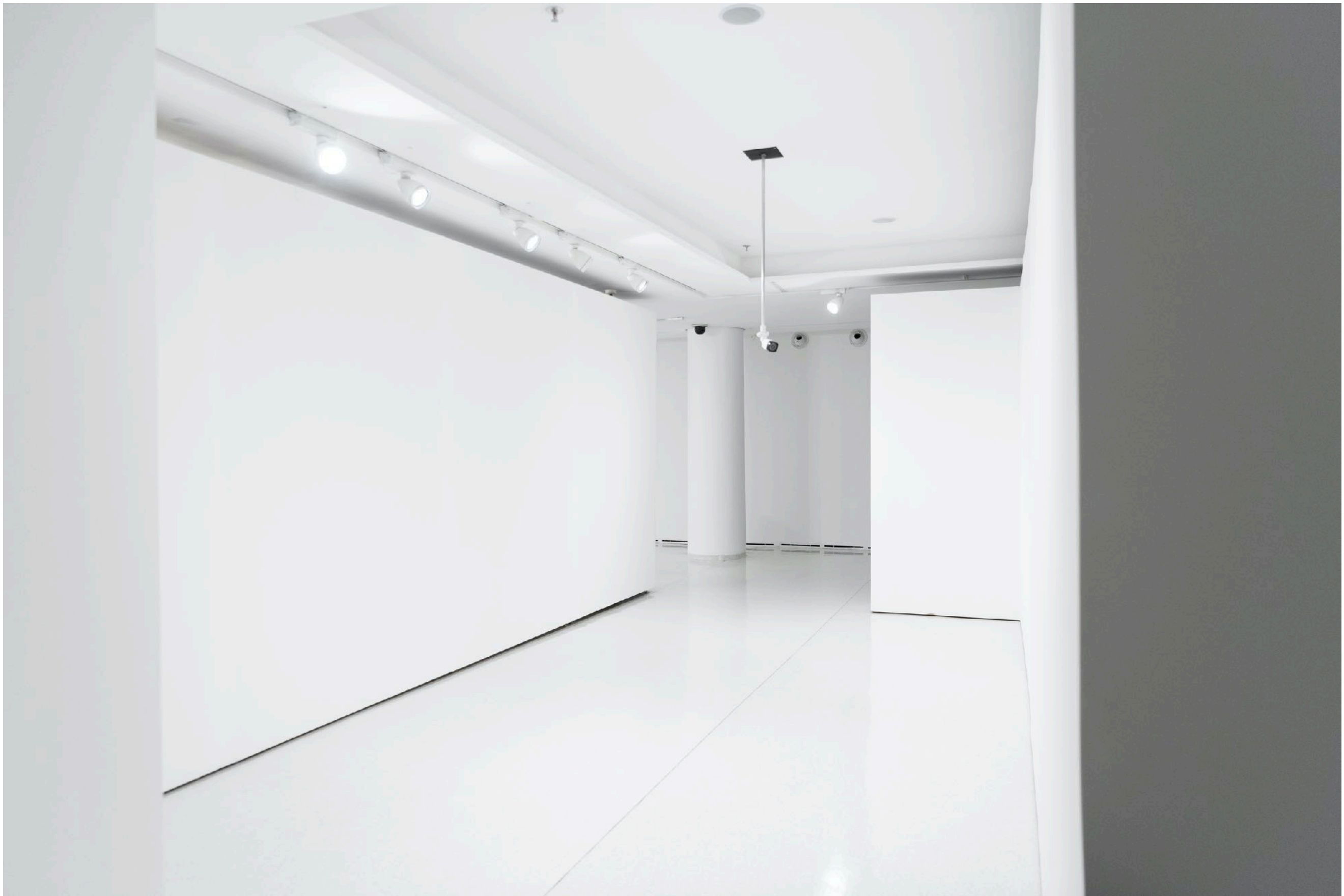
In this hall, near the elevator, a voice — at first low and muffled — is coming from the inside of a light switch on the wall. This small object repeats, with a certain variation, the phrase “turn me off”. Whispering from the wall, and then crying for help, screaming, and seducing. If someone tries to help, the switch will laugh at you.



Watchman, 2023-2025

security camera, aluminum, DC motor, signal converter and TV
variable dimensions

At the center of the room, the most visible intervention, there is a camera that spins on its vertical axis. Hanging from the ceiling, the CCTV camera transmits the live image of the room to a TV in the space. As the camera is spinning, the image never stabilizes, and informs little about what is happening. It is a dysfunctional watchman.



Signal, 2021-2025
modified museum lights, microcontroller, relays
variable dimensions

Still on an infrastructural level, the lights of the space don't seem to be working properly. They have a life of their own. They blink. They communicate with each other. There is an encrypted signal message and a response. In morse code. Or they play games of imitation, repeating patterns of "on and off" that one or the other proposes.



beep 2023-2025
buzzer, microcontroller, laser and sensor modules
variable dimensions

On their way out, when one is trying to leave the room, they will trigger the alarm. With one of those laser sensors normally used in museums and exhibition spaces to control the proximity of the visitor in relation to the works. In this way, every time that one crosses the invisible line to leave the room the buzz of the alarm will be heard.



beep 2023-2025
buzzer, microcontroller, laser and sensor modules
variable dimensions



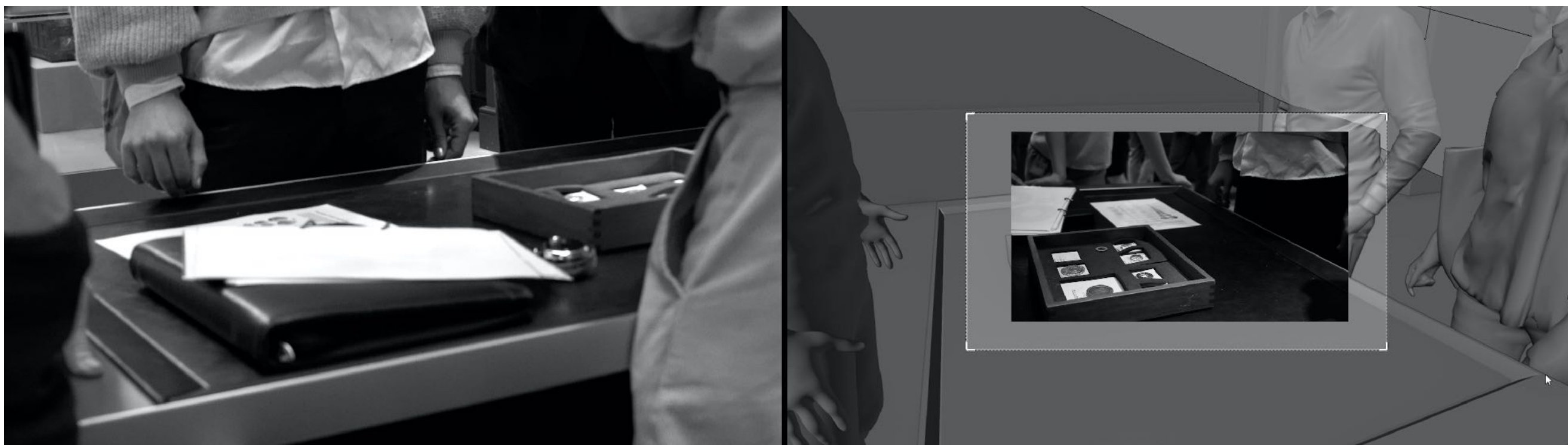
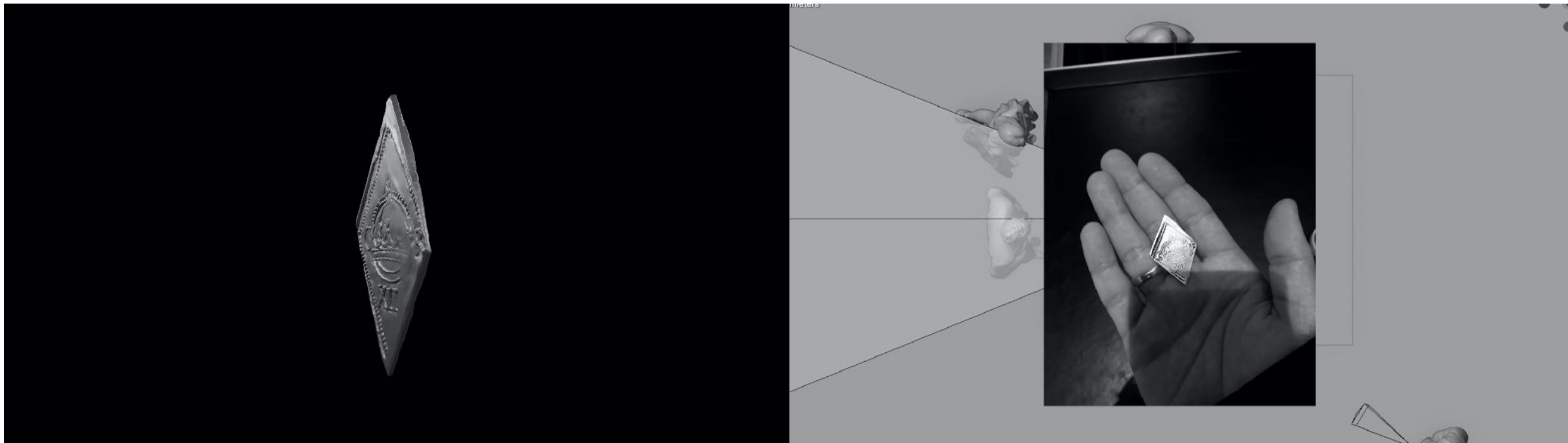
Sleight of Hand, 2023-2024
two-channel video installation
colour, sound, 8'43"

the gesture of this work consisted of temporarily "stealing" a historical coin from the collection of the British Museum. After more than a year of planning, I secretly exchanged a 1645 silver coin minted in Newark during the English Civil War with a fake replica and deposited the object in the donation box of the museum.



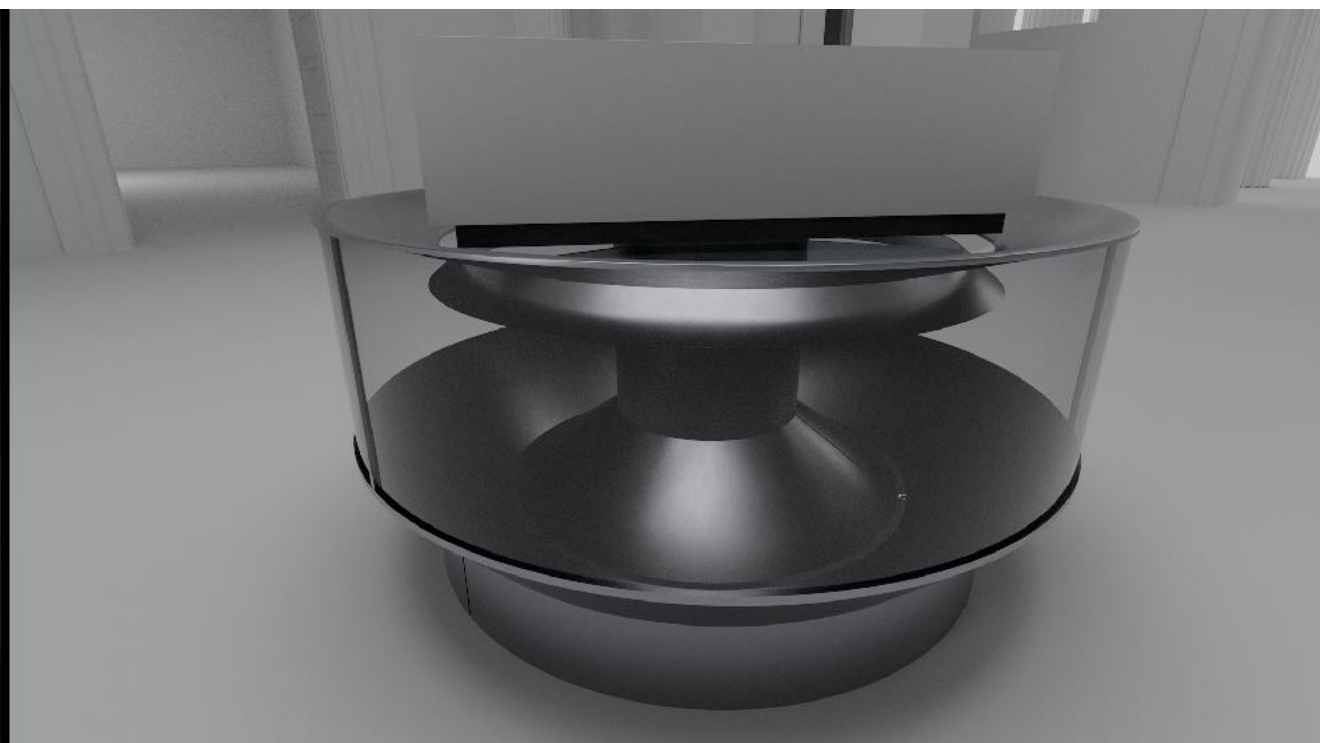
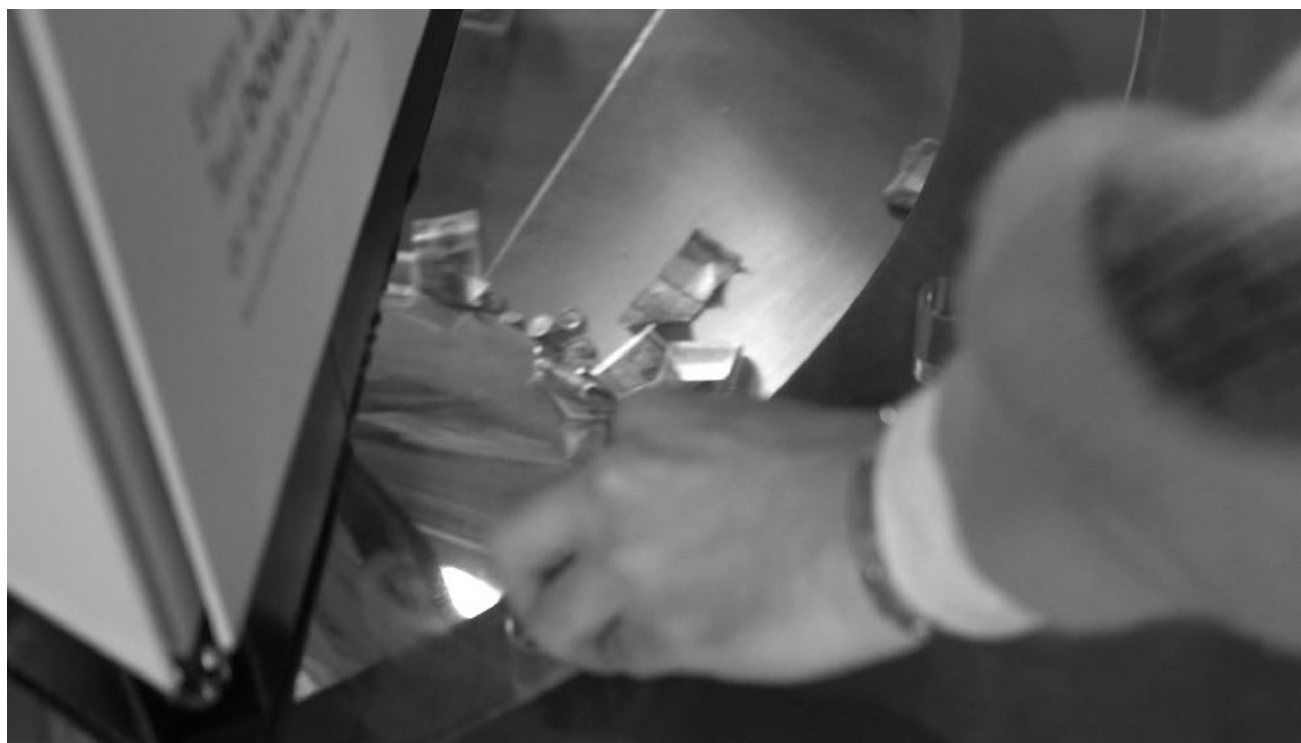
Sleight of Hand, 2023-2024
two-channel video installation
colour, sound, 8'43"

although the main public discourse around this work was through a lens of the decolonial discourse and something in the tradition of "institutional critique", I'm also interested in exploring issues around value, circulation, trickery, authenticity and forgery.



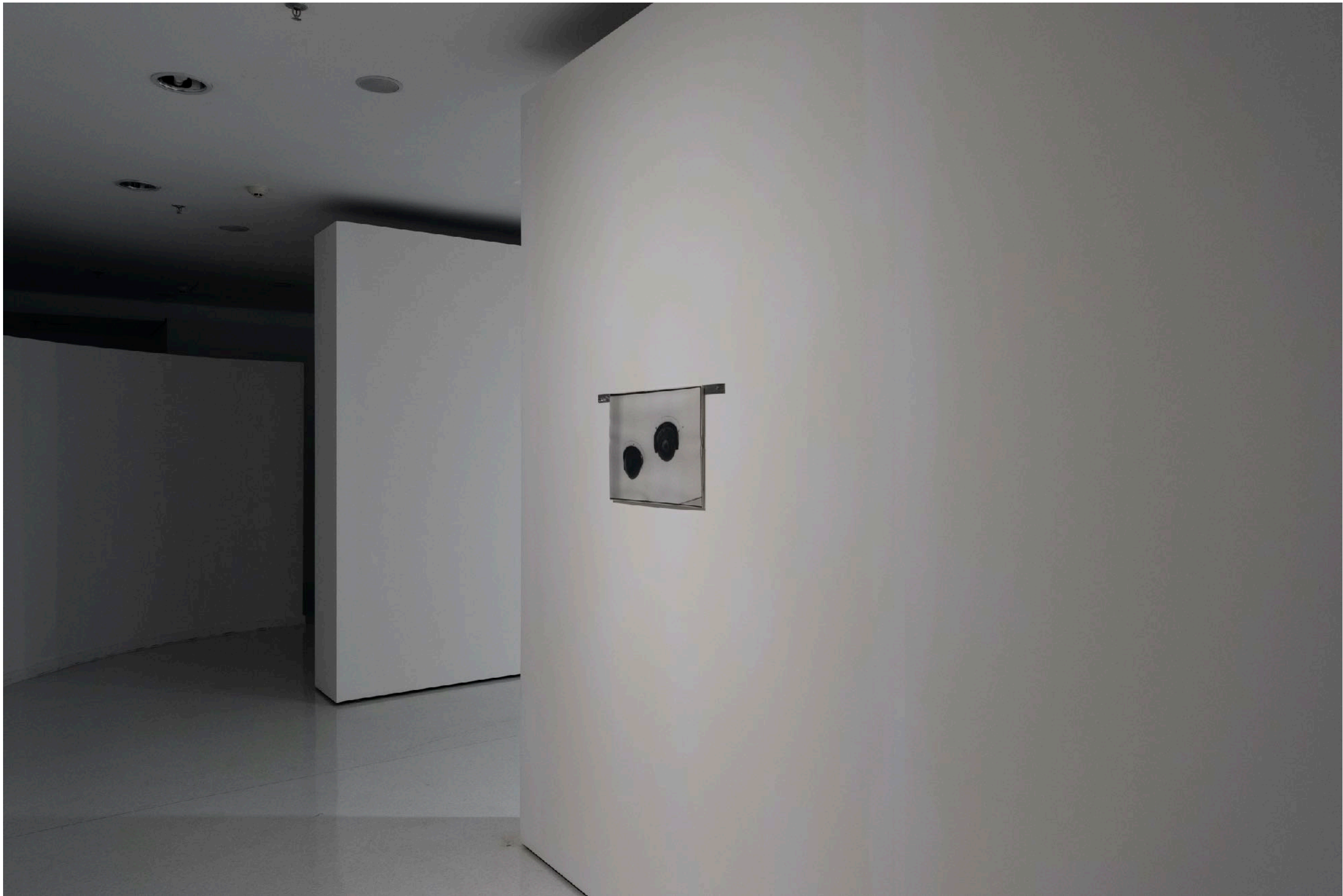
Sleight of Hand, 2023-2024
two-channel video installation
colour, sound, 8'43"

[click here to watch the video](#)
password: trick

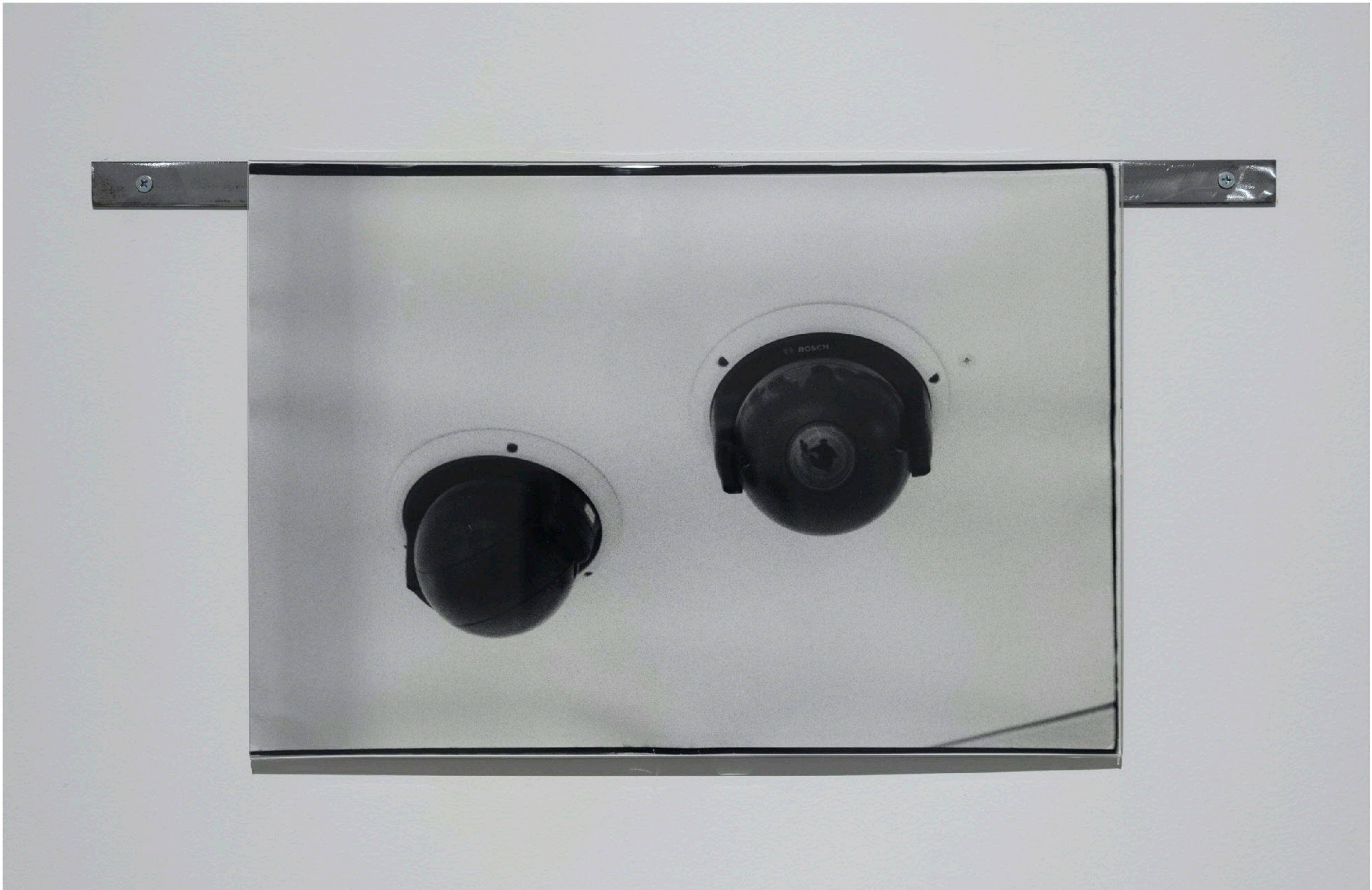


Sleight of Hand, 2023-2024
two-channel video installation
colour, sound, 8'43"

[click here to watch the video](#)
password: trick



trick, 2025
Installation view at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP



Bosch, 2025
silver gelatin print
48 x 32.8 cm

echoing the recurring figure of Hieronymus Bosch's painting as a kind of founding myth of the exhibition, this photograph portrays two of the space's security cameras where it is possible to read the brand of these products "Bosch", connecting the two parts of the exhibition, which concerns the project "Sleight of Hand" and the "Propositions for museum security systems"



trick, 2025
Installation view at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP

gesture:

enter the British Museum

go upstairs to room 68

- the money section

approach table with coins

ask for the "siege coin"

take the coin in my hand

do the sleight of hand

return the fake coin

put the original coin in my pocket

go down the stairs to the South Hall

place the coin in the donation box

leave the museum

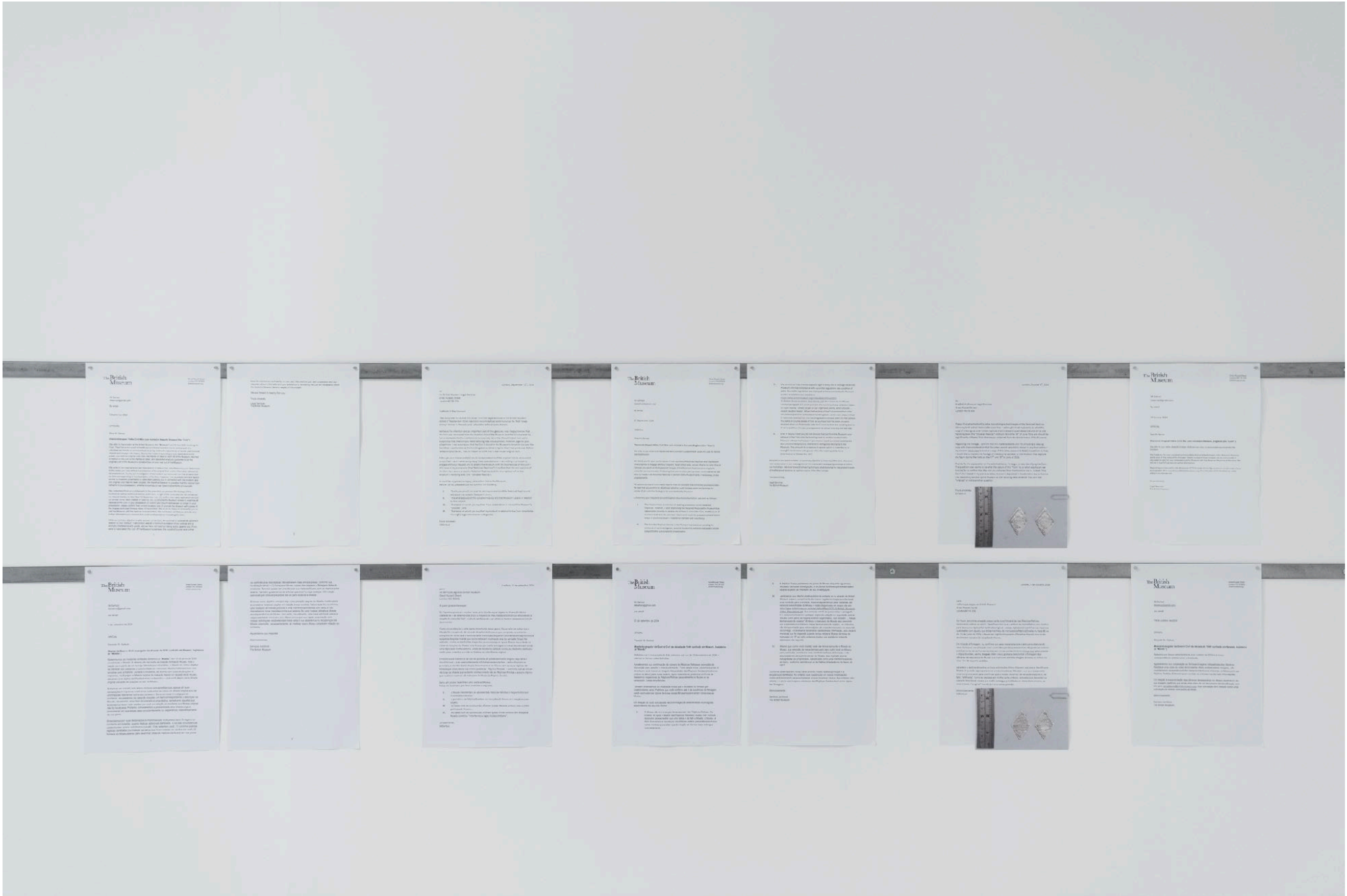


Sleight of Hand (document II), 2023-2024

scanned image from 35mm film of the original coin being handled
by the artist on one of his many visits to the British Museum



Sleight of Hand (document V), 2023-2024
scanned image from 35mm film of the original coin
in the British Museum donation box



Sleight of Hand (letters), 2024

letters exchanged between the British Museum's Legal Services and the artist
variable dimensions, 7 copies on 21 x 29.7 cm paper and translations + 10 x 15 photographs

In these letters that starts with the allegation from the museum saying that “we have reason to believe that, notwithstanding your statements to the press, you may still be in possession of the original Coin”, the artist and the Legal Services investigate the possible interpretations on the “originality” of the coin and what really happened during the heist.



3. As primeiras moedas produzidas no século XVII em Vila Rica, atual Casa Pia, atualmente a Real Casa da Moeda de Pernambuco, demonstram a abundância de ouro em sua produção.

4. Para pagar fornecedores e pagar o soldo no Brasil de Pernambuco, a Casa da Moeda de Vila Rica produziu as chamadas moedas obsidionais, em ouro, com valores em florins.

No entanto, a primeira moeda cunhada no Brasil foi obra dos holandeses e tinha formato quadrangular, conhecido como obsidional. A Holanda dominou parte do nordeste brasileiro, mais especificamente Pernambuco, entre 1630 e 1654, e cunhou suas primeiras moedas entre 1645 e 1646, diante da necessidade de pagar seus fornecedores e do cerco militar de Portugal, que começava a se intensificar e restringia a circulação do dinheiro. As moedas obsidionais de ouro valiam 3, 6 e 12 florins. Traziam as inscrições da Companhia das Índias Orientais em holandês (G.W.C.) no anverso e o nome Brasil no reverso.

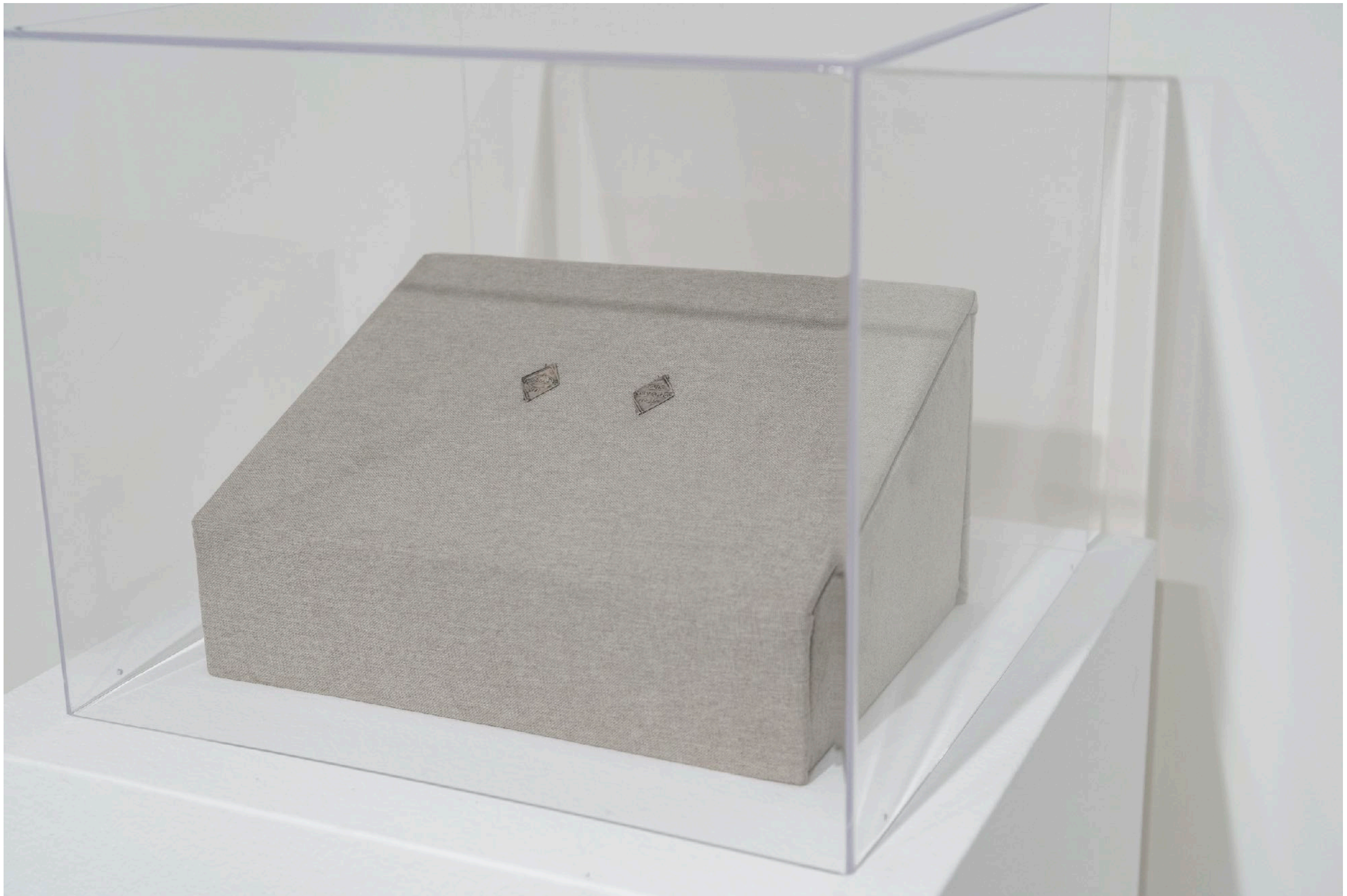
Em 1654, finalmente derrotada pelas tropas portuguesas, a Holanda rendeu-se. Para realizar seus pagamentos finais na colônia cunhou soldos de prata que também traziam as inscrições G.W.C., mas que, ao contrário dos florins de ouro, eram unifaciais. Quadrangular e com apenas uma face, o modelo holandês não prosperou, preservando-se o formato circular e a dupla face, como as séries produzidas pela Casa da Moeda.



No entanto, as dificuldades e riscos de transporte das moedas tornaram necessário mover a instituição para outras capitâneas, onde ficaria até recunhar todo o meio circulante local. Por isso, em 1689, a Casa da Moeda foi transferida para o Rio de Janeiro e, em 1700, deslocada para Pernambuco, onde ficou até 1702, quando foi definitivamente instalada no Rio de Janeiro.

Neste mesmo ano foi autorizada no Brasil a circulação de moedas de cobre – produzidas na Casa da Moeda do Porto e destinadas a Angola –, devido à necessidade de numerário pequeno para pagamentos de menor valor. Vinte anos depois, sua circulação não se fez mais necessária e foi proibida com o surgimento da Casa da Moeda de Vila Rica, em 1722. Portugal havia recuperado sua soberania com o fim da União Ibérica, em 1720 e, nesse momento, o Brasil iniciava o auge de sua época do ouro, atingindo uma produção gigantesca, o que refletiu na cunhagem dos dobrões, entre 1724 e 1727, também para uso exclusivo da metrópole. Para se ter uma ideia da abundância do metal, o dobrão de 20 mil-réis pesava 53,78 gramas, uma das moedas de maior peso em ouro do mundo.

Ilustração e simbologia da moeda no Brasil. Faces da Moeda



Sleight of Hand (coins), 2023-2025
two counterfeit coins on museum display
132 x 60 x 60 cm



Sleight of Hand (Subject Access Request), 2024-2025
documents about the artist held by the British Museum
variable dimensions, 56 copies on paper 21 x 29.7 cm

This series of documents shows images from the CCTV cameras of the British Museum on the day of the heist, the 18th of June 2024, and emails and reports from the institution mentioning Sartuzi's actions. Both of these documents were sent to the artist after an official request. Most of them are censored by the Museum.



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Ilê
Sartuzi, [REDACTED] Mr Sartuzi took a rare Civil
War-era coin from the volunteer led handling desk in one of the British Museum's galleries.
He then press-released this act and presented video evidence of the act as part of his MFA
thesis [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Mr Sartuzi's actions, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Mr Sartuzi's actions did not uphold the
standards of care and respect [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



False Alarm: Symphony for Museum, 2023-2025
 universal fire alarm, high-power bell,
 signaling siren, buzzer, microcontroller, relays
 variable dimensions, 01'49", four times a day

The symphony first start as if an alarm went off, disturbing the normal experience for the visitor. From there, different "voices" and layers gather to create this complex arrangement of sounds in a *crescendo*, creating different movements and compositional dynamics. And, just as it started, it comes to an end and everything is back to normal.

Did Ilê Sartuzi Rob the British Museum?

The artist's exhibition at Museu de Arte Contemporânea in São Paulo presents compelling investigations into surveillance, paranoia and museal security

Mateus Nunes

[Frieze Exhibition Review](#)

24 APR 25

During my visit to Ilê Sartuzi's current exhibition, 'Trick', at Museu de Arte Contemporânea in São Paulo, an alarm went off, blaring for what felt like an eternity. As if to assert my innocence, I remained seated quietly in one of the galleries, only to quickly realize that the disruption was, in fact, a work from the series 'Propositions for Museum Security Systems' (2023); likewise the strange voice I had heard upon my arrival yelling, 'Turn me off!' Indeed, the entire exhibition is peppered with moments like this. Nearby, *Watchman* (2023–25) comprises a CCTV camera spinning rapidly in the centre of an empty room; alongside hangs a monitor displaying the captured footage. The completely blurred images that result from this restless digital 'eye' prompt us to reflect on the paranoid notion of total surveillance and the disorienting concept of the panopticon as a mechanism of discipline and control.

The show's underlying irony is that no alarm is triggered when, in his two-channel video installation *Sleight of Hand* (2023–24), Sartuzi steals a 17th century silver coin from the British Museum's numismatic section. The depicted theft was discovered by the museum much later, through the media, revealing the flaws in the institution's purportedly robust surveillance systems. The footage lasts a few seconds: from the moment the artist removes the coin from the display cabinet in room 68 of the British Museum, replacing it with a replica he created, until he deposits the original in the institution's donation box. Some might not even classify it as a theft, since the object was merely relocated and did not leave the museum's premises.

Sartuzi's regulatory knowledge is also on display in *Sleight of Hand (Letters)* (2024), precisely argued and politely cooperative correspondences with the British Museum's Legal Service, displayed in a room adjacent to the video. The piece undoubtedly points to a legacy of institutional critique and Brazilian conceptual art, evoking works such as Cildo Meireles's *Ocasão* (Occasion, 1974/2004) – an installation that plays with the idiom 'opportunity makes a thief' – while also resonating with contemporary projects like Glicéria Tupinambá's *Okará Assojaba* (2024), presented in the Brazilian pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale, in which the artist corresponds with European museums about their possession of Indigenous mantles.

Highlighting the historically normalized and imperialist heists underwritten by major western art collections, including the British Museum, Sartuzi's *Sleight of Hand* is a brilliantly witty yet almost imperceptible gesture. As such, his work is in dialogue with Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) – a commentary on the Latin American political crisis which saw him invite 500 volunteers to move a dune in Peru a few centimetres using only shovels, inspired by the motto 'maximum effort, minimum result'. Sartuzi similarly stresses the dialectic of such a dynamic: several months of meticulous planning that culminates in nothing more than a slight shift. A small silver coin placed in a donation box mobilizes one of the largest cultural institutions in the world, ignites extensive media attention and questions centuries-old standards. Sartuzi's work is already historic, carving out its place in the panorama of contemporary conceptual art by a mere sleight of hand.

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